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## ARTICLE

### **Beyond evaluative studies: perceptions of teaching qualifications from probationary lecturers in the UK**

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Probation is little used as a frame of reference in academic development literature. Frequently, the focus is on evaluating teaching qualifications for new lecturers. Less often investigated is the issue of situating such a course within the overall experience of new academics, to consider the role that teaching qualifications have within wider probationary processes in the UK. This qualitative study sought the views of new academics on various influences shaping their socialisation. Insights from this work can feed usefully into policy and practices for academic developers, and three key themes – equity, impact and congruence – are elaborated in this article.

*Keywords: probation; teaching qualifications; academic practice; academic development*

#### **Setting the scene**

Probationary lecturers form a specific category of academic staff within the UK higher education system. They are subject to demands that share many characteristics with the tenure system in other national contexts, but there are at least two important differences. First, in the UK, probation is time limited: whilst the time period is variable, it is known in advance, and the most common models require either one or three years' satisfactory service prior to confirmation. Second, in contrast with the United States in particular, an assumption of confirmation tends to exist. There are, however, significant demands placed on probationary lecturers which are not always made explicit. In this article, which reports on a small-scale, longitudinal, purely qualitative study, I aim to explore probationary lecturers' perceptions of just one of their probationary demands, and the one most often made explicit: engagement in a structured course of study that leads to a teaching qualification.

For many years, academic developers have worked strenuously to develop an informed, worthwhile and robust initial professional development agenda for colleagues new to academic life. Their efforts are reflected in a recent survey (Gosling, 2010) showing the widening reach of teaching qualifications as an expectation for probationary lecturers. Even with increasing prevalence, there remain two common views amongst academic developers about the purpose of the postgraduate certificate (PGCert) qualification. In this context, 'PGCert' is a generic term that signifies a qualification validated at postgraduate level that may have a range of titles such as 'teaching and learning in higher education' or 'academic practice'. These courses are offered, usually only institutionally, to new academic staff, often as a mandatory part of probation.

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One view of the PGCert focuses on preparation for, and professionalising, the teaching role (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004). The second view promotes a more diffuse brief, of holistic socialisation to academic practice (Brew and Boud, 1996). Whatever the developer's orientation or institutional mission (Land, 2004), it is now widely acknowledged that massification and increased accountability have brought many pressures to academic roles (Davies and Petersen, 2005). One way of responding to these challenges has been the increasing specification of PGCerts to be obtained by new academics as a mandatory or strongly encouraged element of their probationary experience (Gosling, 2010).

PGCert evaluations follow a broad sweep, from individual institutional studies (for example, Donnelly, 2006), to cumulative work (Bamber, 2009), to studies that aim for reliable replication (Warnes, 2008) and transnational syntheses (Prebble *et al.*, 2004). With a focus on the qualification, evaluative studies probe thoughts and feelings about the worth and experience of participation, usually when it is complete. One difficulty, therefore, is its post-hoc nature, in that it attempts to capture the effects of participation in a PGCert beyond that very participation. In post-hoc evaluation, primary concerns, such as course content and time demands, can be lost, and other contemporaneous issues may never be captured. Beyond concerns with post-hoc evaluation, many large survey studies (Warnes, 2008; Prosser, Rickinson, Bence, Hanbury and Kulej, 2006), focus explicitly on evidencing a particular model of academic development work, where evidence of participants' conceptual change (from teacher- to student-focused) is privileged.

Other work, such as Kahn *et al.* (2008), investigates the nature of the PGCert, problematising how common concepts – such as reflective practice – are employed. The utility of this work lies in helping academic developers refine courses. However, by focusing on the nature of a given approach, it still remains difficult to ascertain how *being there* actually feels and the wider operational context (cf: Comber and Walsh, 2008) often plays no role in analysis. Similarly, informal feedback is frequently available to academic developers, but this is rarely reported in formal evaluations. In contrast, Trowler and Knight (2000) looked at the broader probationary context, from the perspective of discipline-specific orientation, but did not focus on the role played by PGCerts. Archer (2008a and b) also focused on individual socialisation processes, but without relating this to institutional probationary requirements.

This article reports on a study that addressed PGCert participation as just one aspect of the wider context of probation, in order to go beyond the findings of evaluative studies. Whilst recognising a newer strategic direction in UK academic development (Clegg, 2009), and a longstanding concern about the legitimate institutional home of the qualification (Gosling, 1996; 2001), this article confines itself to perceptions of the PGCert from the probationers' broader perspective. In this regard, it perhaps addresses issues that often remain overlooked in conventional evaluation work. This study may be of interest in other national contexts where the development and/or requirement of a formal, structured course leading to a teaching qualification are contemporary concerns.

## **Approach to the study**

A longitudinal research design, in the form of three interviews over a year of the probationary period, was adopted, and this approach limits the scale of the study. Developmental concerns not captured by the 'snapshot' approach common to many large-scale evaluation studies such as Prosser *et al.* (2006) can be addressed, however. Using loosely-structured interviews, 23 new academics from 11 institutions were interviewed. The interviewees are an opportunistic sample comprising only those who responded to an email invitation to participate. Table 1 briefly describes the sample. Equally, this is not course evaluation: discussed here are interviewees' perceptions of their PGCerts as these arose in relation to discussions of their wider probationary experiences.

Table 1. Study participants by institutional type and disciplinary area

	Science/Engineering	Social Sciences
Teaching intensive (n=5)	2	3
Research intensive (n=6)	10	8

Participants belonged to science/engineering or social science discipline groupings. Informed consent, including a promise of confidentiality, was negotiated prior to interviews. This precludes an identification of particular participants with particular disciplines or type of institution. By seeking participants from a range of UK institutions, the work avoids some constraints relating to insider research (Gomm, 2004) such as where the same individual is associated with the study and the PGCert. Ethical issues arose, not from the conduct of interviews, but from the outcomes of them. These issues are explored in the analysis below.

Interviews were recorded and later transcribed, and encouraged a more conversational approach rather than focused questioning. Transcripts were made available to participants where requested, but not until the end of the interview process. In this way, interviewees were able to talk of current thoughts and views, rather than be constrained by what had been expressed previously. Broad prompts, rather than specific questions, were included in the interview schedule. These were supplemented, where necessary, by specific questions to elicit further information. The prompt of most relevance here asked participants in the first interview, ‘What avenues of support are open to you?’ The aim in this approach was to capture the relative importance of the multiple influences on new academics’ experiences to date. In other words, it was important to pay attention to the relatively neglected wider social context (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) into which the PGCert fitted. Further thoughts on the reach of their PGCerts were followed up in subsequent interviews.

Interview prompts related to sensitising concepts such as academic cultures (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Trowler and Cooper, 2002), perceived constraints and enablements (Archer, 1995) and the potential for autonomy (Clegg, 2008). Using a more conversational approach encouraged probationary lecturers to articulate their experiences in a narrative fashion. Once transcribed, issues could later be coded with regard to cultural, structural or agentic influences. In this article, I suggest that undertaking a formal teaching qualification is a structural demand for probationary lecturers: it is one part of the formal rules and regulations that govern employment, along with other academic expectations such as teaching, research and administration/service. Mindful of space and audience, however, my focus here is on the perceptions of new academics with regard to their participation in their PGCert. The influence of departmental and institutional cultures has been considered elsewhere (Smith, 2010).

Thematic analysis, achieved by reading and re-reading within and across transcripts, captured emergent perceptions from the data-set in relation to PGCerts. As broad interview prompts were used to frame the loosely-structured interviews undertaken, direct comparison of responses is not possible. By reading across coded transcripts, however, strong themes emerged and these are detailed below, illuminating a range of experiences of, and responses to, PGCerts. Also included in the analysis below is an example of how a participant’s perceptions change over time, lending support to the value of a longitudinal approach (Sadler, 2008). Potential implications for policy and practice amongst academic developers are then developed in the final section of the article.

### Exploring probationary lecturers’ perceptions of their PGCerts

Following interview transcription and coding, three key themes emerged from reading across transcripts in relation to PGCert participation during probation; these are explored below. First, despite efforts to institutionalise academic development as a more strategic activity (Clegg, 2009), at the operational level of a

department, issues of forward planning in workload allocation are not necessarily well-addressed. This can lead to issues of real or perceived inequity, in both workload allocation and access to teaching opportunities to support participation in the PGCert. Second, by approaching the role of the PGCert obliquely, its relative absence in interview talk might be of concern to academic developers, especially in relation to claims of impact. Lastly, the issue of congruence between PGCert participation and actual practice is explored. As Trowler and Cooper (2002) show, there may be a substantial gap between what is espoused in a PGCert, and the daily practices novice academics encounter within their home departments. Rather than extrapolating to the operational context here, interviewees were able to point to a lack of congruence within some PGCerts themselves, suggesting difficulties with what they perceived as conflicting messages.

## *Equity*

The idea of equity, here, is taken to mean equitable access to opportunities. This theme featured extensively in the coded transcripts, encompassing the two issues of workload allocation and participation in appropriate activities. The first key issue was the time available to interviewees to participate meaningfully in the PGCert. There is evidence related to widely-differing expectations from department to department as to what constitutes an appropriate teaching load for probationers. Even where there are institutional ambitions (and, indeed, policy) to reduce the load for probationary lecturers, this can be exploited. Contrast, for instance, two new academics from science and engineering departments in the same institution:

When I was first handed my teaching load in the beginning of the autumn semester I was given quite a high teaching load and my immediate person who employed me... said 'This is much more.' I was expecting less, she was expecting less, so we got that rearranged, that was reduced, but still a lot higher than what both of us had expected.

I don't do a lot of undergraduate teaching actually. I've got.... I just do a few classes at the moment, a few lectures.

The workload issue frequently combines with a requirement for those new to a department to pick up the teaching of subjects often not visited since undergraduate days. With a lack of strategies for developing teaching materials and styles, the additional burden of revising unfamiliar topics further erodes the time available for the very activities in the PGCert that could ameliorate a stressful and difficult situation. Even in the small sample represented here, it was not difficult to find examples of probationers being assigned uncomfortable or challenging teaching duties. This, perhaps, suggests a lack of careful and strategic planning by departments. It is acknowledged that this is unlikely to be only a contemporary issue. Anecdote suggests this is a long-standing practice in the UK, and formal work in America highlights it as a common phenomenon (Huston, 2009). In an era of increased accountability and surveillance (Davies and Petersen, 2005) however, such practices present probationers with ever-higher hurdles to surmount.

The second key issue is the nature and structure of PGCerts. Given the diverse expectations detailed above, it may be apposite to ask whether course outcomes are equally accessible and achievable by all participants. The comparison of teaching duties is made possible through the conversations engendered by the (relatively new) 'cohort effect' of the PGCert. Before the recent expectation of taking a teaching qualification as part of probation, new academics would most typically be socialised into departmental culture individually. The multidisciplinary nature of participants in PGCerts brings these individuals together and discursive classroom activities highlight differences in practices. The cohort in any specific PGCert, therefore, develops a heightened awareness of expectations and practices that may have gone unremarked in the past, when such opportunities were not available.

The most marked difference in practice that new lecturers remarked upon was actual teaching load. Highly variable workload allocation has an impact on completing PGCert tasks. Those courses taking a strong reflective practice element (Kahn *et al.*, 2008) for instance, may not take adequate account of the sometimes more limited range of participants' circumstances. As an example, in one faculty, contact time varied between 20 hours' 'guest' lecturing and 240 hours' teaching per annum for probationers. This may not provide a level playing field to meet course requirements as participants are asked to undertake tasks on the PGCert which their teaching duties do not allow them sufficient scope to reflect upon<sup>1</sup>.

Evaluations that focus on the conduct and content of a PGCert may well overlook the context of the probationer's wider experience. At the very least, information gained from colleagues in the PGCert process allows probationers to put their experience in context. It may also, of course, present something of an ethical dilemma for academic developers as the cohort effect can expose very different departmental probationary expectations amongst the new lecturers.

## ***Impact***

The second theme to emerge from the data is the impact of the academic development agenda itself, which was rarely volunteered as especially important or influential by participants in this study. One of the most striking things about the interviews with probationers, when they were asked about avenues of support, was the infrequency with which the PGCert was mentioned. It was rarely uppermost in novice academics' minds as a useful tool in their socialisation. Closely aligned to this absence is a perception of disconnection from practice.

Only two of the 23 participants in this study explicitly referred to the PGCert in immediate response to the 'avenue of support' prompt; others chose alternative sources:

good luck and common sense – on paper there are quite a lot of avenues for support officially... but I really feel that all this stuff is massively ineffective because none of it springs from a genuine personal interaction – if I was unsure of what to do with teaching a course, I would predominantly just go and ask a colleague within in my own department... there wasn't university support for new staff or for experienced staff who are maybe struggling with something that they're having to teach – I am just teaching the 10 hours within one whole course... so I can always go to [the course co-ordinator] and ask if I am not sure – our department... is very open to asking for help - I mean I have official channels I can go through for various things, but you can quite often find that you don't actually need to go that far and I can just informally ask people... – I wouldn't necessarily say [the PGCert is] supportive though because in terms of what I actually do, there's no-one at the school level who's supportive of those things

More commonly mentioned were the roles of supportive colleagues, and learning 'on-the-job' (Knight, Tait and Yorke, 2006). This suggests that '*how things are actually done*' remains a more powerful tool in probationary lecturers' socialisation than the goal of '*doing things well*' implicit in PGCerts. Academic developers are unlikely to be surprised by such a finding, especially as probationers are often exposed to certain, if misplaced, conceptions of the role and value of the PGCert (Comber and Walsh, 2008). Many, in this sample, needed a direct follow-up question to ascertain that they were even aware of, let alone participating in, a course for new lecturers.

Gibbs and Coffey (2004) detail very well the thorny issues of eliciting causation from academic development activity to improved student outcomes. They do show that, reassuringly, the correlation is ultimately positive. The point here is that at the time of engagement, relations between PGCert participation and actual practice can be tenuous. It is, however, disappointing that, despite a considerable evaluation literature that points to more and less effective practices, PGCerts can be seen as either inconsequential – as evidenced by their relative absence from participant accounts – or as inimical to the probationary experience.

There were, of course, some well-worn criticisms once the subject of participation in a PGCert was eventually broached. Chief amongst them was the lack of connection to current experiences:

Yeah it has been helpful but it's been helpful in a kind of ethereal academic way than in a practical kind of way that we're talking about so yeah, I've learnt about theories of education and actually I found it quite interesting you know... Something which has kind of, well, I'm afraid dismayed and amused me is what students are like with regard to education so I trot over to the teaching and learning centre<sup>2</sup> and sit and hear about constructivist education, you know, deep learning and [laughs] and introducing a kind of independence you know, and all what I get is what are the exam questions going to be...

It also became clear that as PGCerts have become more theorised, basic practical concerns have been abandoned. Day-to-day practical issues, however, have not gone away. Indeed, with massification and internationalisation as key priorities for higher education, such issues may be on the increase. If developers do not address this need, for fear perhaps of not being taken seriously, probationers may be left floundering.

PGCerts may not be seen as productive avenues of support because they do not speak easily to the daily concerns of novice academics. This point can be seen developing from the perspective of a social scientist, undertaking a PGCert immediately after appointment, across the three interviews conducted:

... They did give me the option to leave it [participation in the PGCert] for a year um, but I kind of thought if I leave it for a year what's the point in doing it at all because I will already have muddled through the first year so if I'm going to learn how to improve my teaching then that's something that I need to do straight away before I get into any kind of bad habits that I then can't be bothered to change so I'm doing it now.

This interviewee was keen to participate in the PGCert in order to appreciate the complexities of a new role. Teaching is considered important, and learning how to be effective is an opportunity to be grasped. By the second interview, there seems less excitement, and issues not only of diminishing impact but also of congruence appear:

things are fine, I'm teaching a little bit more than I was last semester but nothing particularly dramatic, um, and I suppose the PGC course has now really kicked in for better or for worse... Yes, you know I was quite happy to do my plan and do my things and I have done quite well on it but don't agree with any of the comments that were made but pass, hoop, jump through [laughs]

One common observation regarding PGCerts is the difficulty in achieving a balance between subject-specific and generic elements (Comber and Walsh, 2008), resulting in a perception of lack of flexibility. This new academic illustrates how contextualising what is provided on a general teaching qualification to her personal situation requires a good deal of effort:

because some of the generic stuff I thought, well I get that but I don't see how this works in [discipline] and I really want to move that one step further and on the PGC they keep talking about, if you get your head around the generic stuff and then can move on to the subject-specific that's really great, and I actually find it easier the other way round, to look at the subject-specific stuff first

Longitudinal interviewing can capture changing perspectives. Here, early enthusiasm seems to give way to a degree of frustration, exacerbated by the difficulties of decoding feedback. Confidence in teaching would thus appear to be developing from the doing of it (Sadler, 2008), rather than learning about it. Only once in this sample was evidence volunteered of a conceptual epiphany. This suggests that conceptual change models of academic development may often be evaluated too soon, before suitable impact is evident.

## ***Congruence***

Finally, the notion of congruence is a concern, and not only regarding the degree of fit between the PGCert and other departments' practices (Trowler and Cooper, 2002), but also between the key messages of the course and its own practices. As PGCert cohorts tend to be small, many of the techniques modelled in such courses do not seem to relate well to the teaching contexts of a growing number of participants in them. As is intended, participants see the ideas espoused in such courses as good practices to be aspired to, but struggle with implementation issues, for instance, when more discursive activities are promoted. For those who work with very large first-year classes, and perhaps manage postgraduate tutors, rather than the tutorial process itself, they can feel disempowered rather than supported by the PGCert.

Complaints about PGCert assessment are also often related to the idea of congruence. Courses with a strong reflective practice ethos draw criticism from some quarters. There are those who are confused about requirements, as the character of the course does not seem to have a clear view of the role of reflection (Kahn *et al.*, 2008). Others, as probationers, experience reduced teaching responsibilities, such as a limited amount of 'guest' lecturing, which does not lend itself to adequate opportunities for reflection. And then, sadly, a small number of participants in this study felt that their PGCerts, whilst stressing critical, reflective practice, did not actually model this approach. One of them shows us how this feels:

I didn't pass the work. Most of us failed. Because the person doing the marking decided that we didn't use the literature she was expecting us to use, and so didn't like [it]... No. I don't have to re-do it. But I don't.... if I've missed the point of the exercise, then I want to know... And then I thought well if I haven't got the point after attending class and everything, I'm not really sure if I'm going to get the point. Because I'm not a stupid person, I have tried to engage. And the exercises were very much supposed to be reflective, which is so ironic. How can you get that wrong? How you can reflect incorrectly?

Purporting to value reflective practice, but failing to respond to feedback, or by promoting, for instance, innovative assessment practices but requiring traditional essay-based assignments are both strategies that lack congruence in the eyes of some PGCert participants. This suggests that some probationary lecturers experience conflict within their courses. Where this conflict combines with less-than-positive messages (Comber and Walsh, 2008) elsewhere in the probationer's immediate environment, the aims of the PGCert can more easily be sidelined.

## **Some implications for policy and practice**

The PGCert is not the only expectation placed on probationary academics. Teaching, research and administration/service are also vitally important. The perceived nature of departmental culture is an important influence on new academics' views of their roles (Smith, 2010). The focus in this study as a whole has been to consider a teaching qualification as just one aspect of the new academic's experience in the UK context. Work by Archer (2008a and b; Smith, 2010) reports on these wider contextual issues. The aim in this article, however, has been to reflect on participants' perceptions of the PGCert as one avenue of support within the wider probationary experience.

By focusing more broadly on the probationary experience, rather than specifically on participation in a structured teaching qualification, what has emerged from this study illuminates issues that have previously been overlooked in policy and practice in academic development. Absence is as important a feature of these accounts as presence, but one which is unlikely to be exposed when the focus of evaluative research is narrowed to the PGCert alone. This is not to suggest that evaluative studies do not serve us well: they do. But



there appears to be a need to conduct research beyond evaluative studies that pays attention to the wider social context (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The thematic analysis presented here may speak to those charged with policy regarding probationary lecturers. The encroachment of the neoliberal agenda, characterised by increasing accountability and surveillance (Davies and Petersen, 2005) has led to more uniform procedures for students in contemporary higher education. New academics are similarly expected to conform to the same agenda of heightened managerial practices. It appears, however, that actual practices remain less uniform and there remains greater variability in probationary expectations within institutions. Whilst PG Certs appear to impose uniform requirements on new academic staff in the UK context, less attention has been paid to the circumstances under which staff must labour to achieve course outcomes. By casting the focus of this study wider than that conventionally framed in evaluative studies, additional perspectives emerge as important in probationers' perceptions of the role of PG Certs.

In terms of policy, the 'self-wisdom' that can come from cumulative institutional evaluation (Bamber, 2009) thus may appear paradoxical. As surveillance increases (Davies and Petersen, 2005), it is suggested that practices become aligned and equitable. The evidence presented here suggests that there is an unwelcome gap between institutional requirements and local practices, and this is an area that academic developers may be able to influence. Both equitable workload allocation and equitable access to practices that will support successful completion of a PG Cert could be addressed if there were more transparent requirements for probationary lecturers. Giving new academics more flexibility regarding PG Cert completion that takes account of local context, whilst not undermining equivalence of the qualification, may be the most significant challenge here. But, it would seem, the cohort effect of the PG Cert may be uncovering unwelcome differentiation in probationary expectations within institutions which need to be addressed.

In terms of academic development practice, there appears to be a need to more closely align practices and assessment to actual contexts of practice. As Trowler and Cooper (2002) have shown, there can be discontinuity between the practices and values modelled in the PG Cert when compared to local practices. The evidence in this study extends that argument, to show that the messages conveyed by PG Certs can themselves be paradoxical. This discrepancy can make the PG Cert more easily sidelined or ignored, if it is experienced as incoherent or potentially misguided. It is also salutary to note that one key element of academic practice – that of day-to-day practical issues – is much sought after, but commonly currently absent from PG Cert offerings.

Ethical issues also need to be confronted: PG Certs, with multidisciplinary cohorts, enable cross-institutional conversations that illustrate to participants variable aspects of probationary processes, in particular, teaching workloads. As one of the few institutional functions that crosses discipline boundaries at this close operational level, academic developers may need, as Clegg (2009) suggests, to work more strategically to ensure that demands on probationers are equitable. Acknowledging that studies such as this deal in perceptions of practice, the ethical dilemma arises not so much from whether disparities are 'real' or 'perceived', but from what to do next: guaranteeing utmost confidentiality precludes action to resolve difficulties. Moving to a more strategic role may leave some academic developers uncomfortable, however, that the individual development aspect of their role is lost if they become more closely aligned with a performative agenda (Davies and Petersen, 2005).

Similarly, there is an ethical dimension attached to variable probation practices beyond disparities in teaching duties. Where it is possible for new lecturers to conduct their socialisation to an academic role with very limited teaching duties, the PG Cert may inadvertently be disadvantaging some new academics. Probationary academics may not have access to a suitable range of practices to enable them to participate fully in their PG Cert. The tension between having enough teaching to reflect appropriately or too much, disallowing reflection, is clearly a fundamental concern. This suggests that attention be paid to contextualising both practice and assessment regimes (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). Those courses that stress models of

reflective practice or conceptual change may, inadvertently, disadvantage participants whose duties are more limited.

In situating this study in the wider context of probationary experience for UK academics, I aimed to capture a sense of how participating in a PGCert feels when viewed as just one aspect of socialisation to the role. What I hope I have shown is that conventional evaluation may overlook some key issues regarding the role and significance of teaching qualifications for probationary lecturers. With many more countries beyond the UK already requiring or potentially instigating formal teaching qualifications, this study may be informative with regards to what may be an appropriate agenda for probationary lecturers.

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## Notes

1. Not all institutions require successful completion of the whole PGCert within probation. Gosling (2010) provides a useful summary of the current situation across a range of UK universities.
2. The teaching and learning centre is used here as a generic term denoting the institutional home of the PGCert. It does not refer to a specific institutional centre of that name.

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